

Suggestopedia and Japanese Language Teaching

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INTRODUCTION: A study supporting the theoretical aspects of Suggestopdeia

An American soldier in Vietnam blacked out as he stared at the remains of his Vietnamese girlfriend, killed by Vietcong mortar fire. Vowing revenge, he plunged into the jungle. Five days later an American patrol discovered him wandering aimlessly, dazed, disoriented. His memory of the preceding week was a total blank. He had no idea where he had been or what he had been doing for that period. Even after his return to the U.S., he could not recall the blackout period.

Several years later a psychiatrist put him under hypnosis and encouraged him to reconstruct events from his combat days, both before and during the blackout. He calmly recalled earlier events, but when he neared the traumatic episode, he suddenly became very agitated, and more more memories came pouring out. He began to relive the trauma of seeing his girlfriend's body and felt again the revulsion, outrage, and lust for revenge. Then, for the first time, he remembered what had happened after the mortar attack.

This case is excerpted from a Gordon Bower article on mood and memory which illustrates an extreme memory dissociation. The blackout events could be recalled in one mental state but not in another. Hypnosis helped the person return to the mental state he was in when the blackout

started, at that point, the emotional feelings returned, as did memories of the details of the blacked-out events.

Psychologist, Gordon Bower, has used laboratory testing of human subjects to explore his theories in the area of mood as an aid to memory. What he found out was that emotional states have a powerful influence on selective perception, learning, retrieval, judgements, thought, and imagination. His basic premise is that (based on the old theory that memory depends upon associations between ideas) emotion has the same effect as an "active idea unit" in the memory system. The important point here is that "an active emotion unit can enter into association with ideas we think about, or events that happened, at the time we are feeling that emotion." (Bower 66) Dr Bower's experiments also concluded that people who are happy, sad or angry produce free associations that are predominantly happy, sad, or angry, respectively. In addition, according to these experiments, mood affects the way we "see" people. In reading others' intentions the emotional premise from which we begin strongly influences what we conclude. The happy person has a benevolent interpretation of social events while the grouchy seems determined to take the uncharitable view.

The second hypothesis is that "the mood-congruity effect comes from the influence of emotional intensity on memory," (Bower 68) the idea being that intense emotional experiences are better remembered. However the reasons for this are not yet clearly understood.

The core of the article seems to be the important notion that "an aroused emotion can be viewed as an active unit in an associative memory and that it stimulates memories, thoughts, perceptual categories, and actions." (Bower 69) One point of the article that I found very interesting was the fact that there was no real difference between learning recalling

in a happy mood and learning and recalling in a sad mood, the important point was not which mood the subject was in but rather that the subject was in the same mood when both learning and recalling. It was exciting to learn that research done for this article supports many teaching methods I have studied under the title "Suggestopedia."

The article refers to the use of hypnosis and mood altering drugs in various experiments which linked mood to memory recall. Of course these two methods of mood inducement are not practicable in the classroom, so what suggestopedia does is use music to create mood. The music is used along with various relaxation techniques at the beginning of class to relax the students and get them into a receptive mood for the day's lesson. As the article points out, if a like mood can be reproduced the students will have better recall of the things they learned while previously in that mood.

It should be noted here that of course it is unrealistic to expect the students to reproduce this mood every time they are in a situation where they will use their foreign language skill, however, that is not the point. The music/relaxation technique is a classroom exercise designed to help students over the initial hurdles of language recall or is used to set the tone for daily classroom activities.

BASICS OF SUGGESTOPEDIA

Suggestopedia is a teaching method developed by the Bulgarian psychiatrist and educator Georgi Lozanov. As originally developed, Suggestopedia is a specific set of learning recommendations derived from Suggestology. Lozanov believes that language learning can occur at a much faster rate than that which ordinarily transpires. The reason for our inefficiency, Lozanov asserts, is that we set up psychological barriers to

learning: We fear that we will be unable to perform, that will be limited in our ability to learn, that we will fail. One result is that we do not use the full mental powers that we have. According to Lozanov and others, we may be using only five to ten percent of our mental capacity. In order to make better use of our mental reserves, the limitations we think we have need to be 'desuggested.' Suggestopedia, the application of the study of suggestion to pedagogy, has been developed to help students eliminate the feeling that they cannot be successful and thus, to help them overcome the barriers to learning. Lozanov claims that learning via the suggestopedic method occurs at a rate many times greater than that in learning by conventional methods.

As summarized by Richards and Rogers (1986: 147-48) a Suggestopedia course lasts thirty days and consists of ten units of study.

Classes are held four hours a day, six days a week. The central focus of each unit is a dialogue consisting of 1200 words or so, with an accompanying vocabulary list and grammatical commentary. There is a pattern of work within each unit and a pattern of work for the whole course. Unit study is organized around three days. On the first day of work on a new unit the teacher discusses the general content of the unit dialogue. The teacher answers any questions of interest or concern about the dialogue. The dialogue then is read a second and third time. Days 2 and 3 are spent in primary and secondary elaboration of the text. Primary elaboration consists of imitation, question and answer, reading and so forth. The secondary elaboration involves encouraging students to make new combinations and productions based on the dialogue. A story or essay paralleling the dialogue is also read. The whole course has a pattern of presentation and performance. Students are given a new name in the second language and a new biography in the second culture with which they are to operate for the duration of the course. Teachers are

expected to be skilled in acting, singing, and psychotherapeutic techniques. A Lozanov-taught teacher will spend three to six months training in those field.

The most conspicuous characteristics of Suggestopedia are the authoritative behavior of the teacher, the use of music and the arrangement of the classroom. Of these the most obvious feature is the centrality of music and musical rhythm as an aid to learning.

Lozanov believes most effective learning takes place in a relaxed environment and lists several theoretical components critical to achieving such an environment. Authority: people remember best and are most influenced by information coming from an authoritative source. Scientific-sounding language, highly positive experimental data, and true-believer teachers constitute a ritual placebo system that is authoritatively appealing to most learners. Authority is also used to suggest a teacher-student relationship like that of parent to child.

The next factor is Double-Planedness: The learners are affected not only by the direct instruction but also from the environment in which the instruction takes place. The bright decor of the classroom, the musical background, the shape of the chairs and the personality of the teacher are considered as important in instruction as the form of the instructional material itself. The third factor, made up of three parts, Intonation, Rhythm, and Concert Pseudo-Passiveness: Varying the tone and rhythm of presented materials helps both to avoid boredom though monotony of repetition and to dramatize, emotionalize, and give meaning to linguistic material. Both intonation and rhythm are coordinated with a musical background which helps to induce a relaxed attitude optimal for learning. Anxieties and tension are relieved and the power of concentration in regard to new material is raised. The idea that music can affect your

body and mind certainly isn't new. The key was to find the right kind of music for just the right kind of effect. At the institute Lozanov recommends a series of slow movements of Baroque concertos strung together into a half-hour passive concert as a way of beginning class. He notes that in such concerts "the body relaxed, the mind became alert."

Gorden Bower's experiments and Suggestopedia are mutually supportive. The learning environment that Suggestopedia creates helps to set up a relaxed but focused mood. The music plays an especially central role. Once students tie a memory to music, the memory and the music are associated with each other and work as cross motivation, each reinforcing the meaning of the other. I'm sure everyone here has had the experience of listening to the radio when suddenly a song comes on that takes you back to a time and place in your past and the memory is so vivid that you can recall even the most minute details. These recalled slices of life are, often as not, relatively inconsequential moments in your life, but the music brings them vividly back all the same.

APPLIED SUGGESTOPEDIA

One problem with the Lozanov method is in its practical application. For those of us who are teaching at institutions such as University of Minnesota, where I am currently an instructor, and where the total enrollment of Japanese language students is about 300, we do not possess the kind of classroom environmental control envisioned by Lozanov. We do not have access to special, comfortable chairs for all the students or special lighting for example. Also language instruction at such institutions is only part of a broader course of study, prohibiting total immersion in language study. Therefore it is not possible to carry out the total Suggestopedia 'method' as it is. However this does not mean that we

cannot provide an environment designed to reduce the barriers our students bring with them. Applying conspicuous features of this method such as the 'use of music' to our own circumstances, after a due understanding of the philosophy of Suggestopedia, I believe gives us a great opportunity to teach Japanese through stimulating activities, although in this case it can of course no longer be called Suggestopedia. It should also be noted that Lozanov is steadfastly opposed to the use of mere portions of his method, claiming that such use is ineffective relative to the nature of the entire Suggestopedia course.

I experimented with this 'applied Suggestopedia' using some students in each of the beginning, intermediate and advanced Japanese classes at the University of Minnesota. The sessions were conducted once a month on average. The selected music was not only Baroque, but also music from New age artists such as George Winston, Kitaro, and Yanni. Students were generally more accepting of this type of music than classical music. New Age Music not only maintained the stability of the class mood but also helped the students to visualize scenes through its environmental sounds. In the beginning sessions especially music that gave concrete images was the most suitable and easiest to use in classroom activities. On the other hand a more abstract type of music performs a necessary function at the advanced level, as the students' language abilities develop from concrete ideas to abstract ideas.

At the beginning level: Use music that can support a specific scene, such as a forest, rain, the ocean or wind and based on the music write a short passage that is read at the beginning of class along with the music. The important point is to relate the content of the passage to the students learning schedule and to use known vocabulary and grammar. It is also a good idea to have students draw a picture based on the passage and discuss what is in the picture. In this manner there will be a triangular

relationship created between the music, the passage and the picture they draw. Later have students volunteer to draw their picture on the board and explain the picture using the target language. The next day, before class starts, play only the music in order to reinforce what they did in the previous class. To commit the exercise to long term memory the teacher should have students listen to the music along with the passage before they go to sleep and when they wake up.

At the intermediate level: The music and passage can be a little more abstract. The teacher writes a passage, including vocabulary and grammar, and reads or plays a recorded reading along with the music. This is a simple listening activity. Another way is to have students write a passage based on the music, either individually or in groups, and later the teacher records the passage as a study aid. This way is effective since the passage is derived from the student's own imagination and they can easily associate their ideas with the music.

At the level of intermediate high and advanced: It is a good idea if some sort of story such as a fairy tale, novel, or portion of a play is used along with the music. It may be that the material is rewritten for intermediate level students to better conform to their abilities. In this case the mood of the music and the passage should be mutually suggestive so as to aid in the formalization of abstract ideas. In any case the students should have a written passage with a literal translation they can refer to. The crucial point of this activity is to create a relaxed mood, therefore, whether or not students are allowed to read the passage before or after class is not a question. Taking into account the students' level the teacher can hand out the passage and the translation prior to the reading of the passage so that the students can listen to both the music and the passage without anxieties of not knowing what's going on.

CONCLUSION

These activities were found to be quite effective. When the music is replayed, students are able to recall their memories of the passage. They learn the vocabulary and sentence structure of the story as well as shades of meaning associated with particular words.

I look forward to applying Lozanov's pedagogical trinity, that is: teacher authority, decor of classroom and the use of music, but the circumstances surrounding a large university do not currently make this feasible.

There are currently many teaching methods in daily classroom use and obviously there is no single method that works for everybody and every set of circumstances. Various teaching methodologies are tools and a teacher like a good mechanic selects his tools based on the particular job at hand. It is as inappropriate to use the same approach in trying to solve all learning and teaching problems as it would be for a mechanic to try make every car repair using only a hammer. Applying the method to specific classroom circumstances gives both teachers and students an opportunity to be exposed to the Japanese language from a different point of view, one which hopefully inspires more complete learning. What proposed here is a way of incorporating new, student involved activities into regular classroom work. Activities which were found to be quite effective in practical application and as a guide towards more effective teaching over all.

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